Opinion - Syrian Comedy post-Assad

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Comedy is the art of telling the truth without hitting the threshold of offense. Testing what that threshold is at any given time is exactly where the utility of Comedians lies for societies, especially those living under authoritarian rule (Billig 2005). For the duration of both Assad regimes, the father and the son, Syrian Comedy has been doing just that. For years, Comic productions have dramatized to Syrians that which they already know; the absurd realities of everyday life that they have grown accustomed to ignoring. Through the dramatization of the known, humour allows people to re-asses their realities by detaching them from their own lived experiences.

However, to think of comedy as a tool for political protest only is too simplistic, and for lack of a better word, clean. In Assad's Syria, Comedy was both a vehicle for unwelcome critique, and a stabilizing force that further perpetuated the regime's ideology (Wedeen 2013). In inhabiting both poles, the Comedy subgenre of Syrian drama constituted an entire sphere in which the dramatized reflection of an underground, cautious, and intellectual public sphere was oddly hyper visible.

Over the years, Syrian drama has produced thousands of comic productions that directly addressed the grim realities of living in Syria. Through sketches of impactful series such as *Maraya* (Mirrors), viewers would be exposed to a dramatized version that reminded them of the limits of their own citizenship. In that, Syrian comedy was clearly an institution of discipline. More notable, however, was the role of Syrian comedy in revealing the complicity of the ordinary citizens themselves in co-producing the absurdities of Syrian life. By that, reducing the efficacy of Comedy as a tool for political protest against the regime and doubling, instead, as collective confessions of the citizens themselves for their role in the becoming of Syria.

Having operated across both Assad regimes, the Syrian media industry has demonstrated an impressive understanding of the political context within which it still managed to produce art. Although to many, Hafiz Al Assad and Bashar Al Assad were unbroken continuations of the same regime, the two regimes, while not binaries, were markedly different in the kind of lived experiences that they created for the ordinary Syrian. For instance, the Hafiz regime was a lot clearer in communicating his citizen-limits than his son was (Wedeen 2013). Enabled by the disciplining capacity of his personality cult, he would draw a thick line between what was acceptable and what was not (Wedeen 2013).

Meanwhile, Bashar's initially signalled a gentler, kinder image, that sold aspirational freedom as a part of its new good-life ideology (Wedeen 2013). This good-life ideology was a bundle of the most liberal policies and the most autocratic, earning Syria the label of *neoliberal autocracy (Wedeen 2013)*. The problem with this conflation of neoliberalism and authoritarianism was that it produced a grey model that challenged the political imaginary of Hafiz's black-and-white Syria. Bashar had dis-drawn the line that Hafiz left behind. This created a real problem for the media industry that not only didn't know where the lines were, but also didn't have the political vocabulary that could capture the new, paradoxical, coercively liberal Syria. If comedy symbolizes forbidden knowledge as the robust humor literature suggests, then the status of Syrian Comedy demonstrates that forbidden knowledge was a lot more accessible in Hafiz's Syria than in Bashar's.

Under Hafiz, little guesswork was needed for Comedians to know where the redlines really were. For instance, the use of regional dialects such as the Druze or Alawi dialects were not to make it to Television productions, and would

be limited to theatre only (Dick 2007). Meanwhile, under Bashar, serials like*Spotlight* (*Boqa'a Daou)* and *Forgotten Village's (Dayaa Dayaa)* entire punchline were often predicated on the expert use of these dialects, which were understood as direct references to the regime's Alawi core (Dick 2007). An overwhelming majority of the characters subject to the show's ridicule were also based in a non-urbanite setting, and sometimes in Latakia itself – the state of origin of the Assads themselves – strengthening the reference to regime's base even further (Dick 2007).

Additionally, under Hafiz, the majority of skits were limited to delivering political criticism to the regime's middle ranks, never addressing the pillars of power directly (Dick 2007). Under Bashar, however, the rank of director-general (*modeer 'aam*) was finally crossed to include members of the security-miliary complex, the intelligence apparatus, ministers, and ironically political censors themselves. This shattering of the old ceiling was a direct result of Bashar's new rhetoric of a new Syria, in which freedom can be aspired to, by those who behave as "good citizens". Soon, interpretive comedy of what it means to be a good citizen became a core punchline in Syrian sketches that almost insisted on the social construction of a corrupt Syria.

The emphasis on the role of everybody in co-managing Syrian life inadvertently humanized everyone. Through comic dramatization, it articulated an argument on behalf of all political existences in Syria. This included the corruption of the corrupt, the dissent of the dissident, and the perpetrations of the perpetrators. Surely, a noteworthy achievement. However, in doing so, it also created a negative appreciation for the services of the regime in limiting the power of their morally deprived, fellow citizens, reinforcing the uncertainties of freedom that could come from co-sharing a freedom with citizens as lacking in 'goodness' as their fellow citizens are presented to be.

From 2011 till 2024, the price for political humour increased, driving it, in many (but not all) cases to underground productions (Noderer 2020). Pro-revolution comedians deployed political humour in symbolically de-throning their leader (Noderer 2020). They did so by crossing the line into direct insults to the persona of the leader, including his physical features (Noderer 2020). No longer were the scripts hidden, multi-layered or open to interpretation. Meanwhile, during this same time, Syrian media continued operating in a back-and-forth relationship with the censors in putting out skits that were still critical of everybody during the war.

To many, the level of tolerance a government has for its comedians is an indicator of its health. The Assad years produced rich content that provides deep insight into the health of both Syrias. What is left to be seen is how will the new government of Syria, through its transition and consolidation, react to Political Humour? Will the Syrian opposition that produced many years-worth of jokes accept being the subject of ridicule now? Will civil society continue to accept its role as complicit in the post-becoming of Syria? Whatever the answers may be, it is worth celebrating the end of an era for remarkable Syrian comedy that was produced within the context of unfreedom.

References

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